

Harvest plan targeted at down timber

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Two Northwest lawmakers will introduce a bill in Congress today calling for the harvest of timber blown down by hurricanes or trees ravaged by forest fires.

The bill is expected to draw protests from the environmental community, but common sense needs to trump environmentalists' suspicion of the forestry industry.

"There are those who will say that you should never harvest trees in a burned area, but I disagree with that," said Rep. Brian Baird, D-Vancouver. Baird, who represents Olympia and southwest Washington in Congress, co-authored the legislation with Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River, who is the representative for all of eastern Oregon.

The bill makes sense. The average person would agree that it's a terrible waste to leave all burned trees or trees blown down in a windstorm to rot. When more of those dead trees are harvested for use as lumber or paper, fewer living trees will fall to the sawyer's blade.

The nation has seen several catastrophic events in recent years, from hurricanes along the Gulf Coast to monumental fires in the West.

"That wood is useable if you get to it quickly enough," Baird said. "But the value of the wood declines from the moment that wood starts to decay."

The Forest Service can put the dying timber on the harvest block, but appeals through the National Environmental Protection Act can and do result in full environmental impact statements and years of delay. By the time the U.S. Forest Service has authority to harvest, the timber is worthless.

The Walden/Baird legislation expedites the process for recovery from catastrophic forest loss.

Under their legislation, a quick response team would be sent in by the Forest Service after a catastrophic event. The team members would assess the environmental and economic consequences of harvesting the timber -- everything from a full-blown harvest of every tree to selective harvesting.

Forest Service officials would have 90 days to draft a harvest plan. The public would be invited to comment on the proposed harvest during the entire 90-day period.

Baird said the harvest plan adopted by the Forest Service would have to be in concert with the forest management plan for the federal property. In other words, if the forest management plan said no timber could be harvested within 200 feet of a stream, the harvest plan would have to exclude all dead trees in that 200-foot buffer.

"I want to be explicit," Baird said. "This legislation is not to be used to harvest green trees."

The legislation would apply to Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management property only. It explicitly excludes wilderness areas and national parks.

Environmentalists will say that the bill will be used to build more roads into federal lands.

Baird counters, saying a provision in the bill dictates that upon the completion of the harvest, all roads will be decommissioned.

As for reforestation, the legislation calls for a diversity of tree species to be replanted.

Baird is right when he says, "It drives people crazy to see a burned forest with all that wood going to waste." The key is to draft a bill that will allow the reasonable harvest of decaying timber in a way that is environmentally sound. Baird and Walden are off to a good start.